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ABSTRACT

Concerns about the isolation of youth and the decline of available social capital have given rise to a new wave of workplace mentoring programs focused on youth in poverty. Most such programs have targeted youth in school and community settings; however, youth mentoring efforts in workplace settings are becoming increasingly prevalent for several reasons, including the perceived limitations of many current mentoring arrangements and active involvement of many corporations in mentoring outside the workplace. The newer wave of workplace mentoring involves exposing noncollege-bound youth to career options, academic counseling/tutoring, and emotional support. Youth apprenticeship programs are another arena where workplace mentoring is playing a major role. Two of the biggest issues facing formal mentoring programs are social distance and time constraints. The following suggestions have been distilled from research on the best practices in workplace mentoring programs targeting youth: (1) acknowledge mentoring as an art; (2) take the time to train mentors in advance and throughout the program; (3) orient students to the mentoring concept before matching students and mentors; (4) schedule enough time for meetings; and (5) support youth and mentors once a match has been formed. (Contains 21 references.) (MN)

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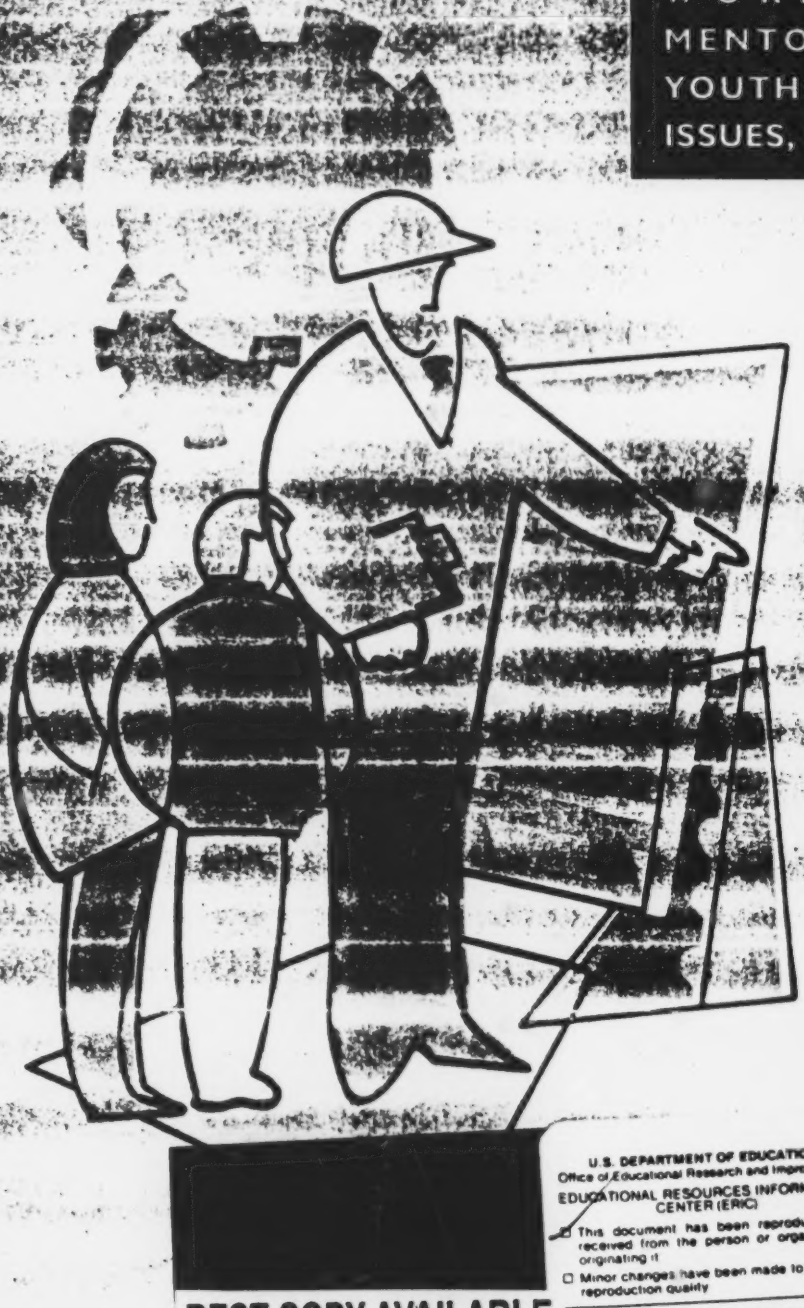
Education Reform and School-to-Work Transition Series

ED 381 670

WORKPLACE MENTORING FOR YOUTH: CONTEXT, ISSUES, STRATEGIES



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Workplace Mentoring for Youth:
Context, Issues, Strategies

by Marc Freedman and Rachel Baker

Prepared for

National Institute for Work and Learning
Academy for Educational Development

The Academy for Educational Development, founded in 1961, is an independent, nonprofit service organization committed to addressing human development needs in the United States and throughout the world. Under contracts and grants, the Academy operates programs in collaboration with policy leaders; nongovernmental and community-based organizations; governmental agencies; international multilateral and bilateral funders; and schools, colleges, and universities. In partnership with its clients, the Academy seeks to meet today's social, economic, and environmental challenges through education and human resource development; to apply state-of-the art education, training, research, technology, management, behavioral analysis, and social marketing techniques to solve problems; and to improve knowledge and skills throughout the world as the most effective means for stimulating growth, reducing poverty, and promoting democratic and humanitarian ideals.

The National Institute for Work and Learning, an institute of the Academy since 1988, seeks to bring the work, education, government, and community sectors together around the shared goal of working collaboratively to improve education–work relationships in the interests of individuals and society. Three areas of concentration define the Institute's activities: successful youth transition; work life education and adult literacy; and productive aging. The Institute accomplishes its mission in each of these areas through research, program documentation and evaluation, policy analysis, technical assistance and training, and information networking.

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Foreword

As we approach the twenty-first century, a large segment of our nation's young people are having a harder and harder time moving from school to work with any reasonable prospect for long-term productive employment. The lack of a comprehensive and effective school-to-work transition system not only frustrates many students but also has substantial costs to business and to our economy as a whole. A skill-deficient work force hampers our nation's economic growth, productivity, and ability to compete in an international economy. New modes of information and technology have forced a restructuring of the home, the school, and the workplace. As a result, there is a critical need to create systems that effectively serve the interests and potential of young people who are not planning to enter college directly after high school. These students need to leave school with the diverse skills, knowledge, abilities, and attitudes necessary for a rapidly changing world of work; community, social, family, and adult responsibilities; and lifelong learning.

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 offers a chance to bring together partnerships of employers, educators, and others to build an effective school-to-work system that prepares young people for either high-quality jobs or further education and training. The new system must include the following basic program elements:

- work-based learning that provides a planned program of job training or experiences, paid work experience, workplace mentoring, and instruction in general workplace competencies
- school-based learning that provides career exploration and counseling, instruction in a career major, and a program of study that is based on high academic and occupational skill standards
- connecting activities that bring schools, students, and employers together to connect the worlds of school and work by matching students with work-based learning opportunities and by training teachers, mentors, and counselors

The challenge is to build and implement a new system that moves beyond business as usual for students who are not on the college path. Their transition process from school to work must become the coordinated responsibility of school, family, business, community, and government. No single institution can or should take sole responsibility for or be expected to provide all of the approaches to educating, training, guiding, preparing, and supporting our young people.

The Academy for Educational Development's National Institute for Work and Learning has undertaken a Study of School-to-Work Transition Education Reform supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. The study focuses on the planning and design, implementation, and impact of school-to-work transition reform initiatives. By documenting the design and integrity of exemplary programs and by assessing program experiences and impacts, the study offers critical lessons for those interested in adapting or adopting programs that effectively link schools with the business community to improve the transition from school to work. As part of the study, a series of papers have been commissioned to identify critical issues facing practitioners and policy makers as they begin to design and implement new school-to-work transition systems.

The overall study has been guided by a National Advisory Panel, which has provided direction and advice on the issues to be explored and topics to be considered. The National Advisory Panel comprises the following individuals:

Paul Barton
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Policy Information Center
Educational Testing Service

Cynthia Brown
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Council of Chief State School Officers

Jacqueline P. Danzberger
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This paper accomplishes the following:

- examines the concept of workplace mentoring regarding its potential to augment the development and employability of young people and to improve the work force
- reviews the literature and practice related to mentoring, youth apprenticeship, youth development, and worker training
- offers an overview of the concept of mentoring, from its early use in Homer's *Odyssey*, through current conceptions of mentoring as essential for nurturance, socialization, and development
- discusses the recent rise of mentoring as a response to the isolation of youth and the resulting lack of positive development
- offers examples of workplace mentoring initiatives
- explores a set of general and specific issues in mentoring
- offers five elements for effective work site mentoring that relate to the need for sufficient resources and a solid program structure
- provides critical information and lessons about workplace mentoring as an essential element for work-based learning strategies

Without preparation of mentors and youth, the scheduling of sufficient time, and support for the match, the relationship will not be beneficial for the young person or the mentor.

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 emphasizes work-based learning. As such, workplace mentoring has great potential to grow in importance. As employers, educators, and policy makers consider the challenges of developing a coherent school-to-work system, they should consider the potential of workplace mentoring as a strategy for developing the social skills, social capital, and employment-related skills of youth.

Ivan Charner
Vice President and Director
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Introduction

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, federal legislation designed to help communities bridge the gap between education and employment, proposes three types of strategies: school-based learning elements, work-based learning elements, and an array of connecting activities designed to smooth the difficult transition from school to work. Prominent among the connecting activities is the idea of expanding the use of "workplace mentors" (Olson 1993).

In recent years mentoring has developed a wide and fervent following. The School-to-Work Opportunities Act, in its call for workplace mentoring, extends the idea of mentoring beyond the school and youth organization settings, where it is usually targeted, to include a new and generally older group of young people.

While the School-to-Work Opportunities Act's support for workplace mentoring is significant in its demonstration of federal support for the concept, the idea has been gaining currency elsewhere. Mentoring is an integral component in many of the growing number of youth apprenticeship programs as well.

In the context of such growing interest and policy activity, this paper explores the concept of workplace mentoring, asking a simple question: "Should we be interested in workplace mentoring as a vehicle both to augment the development and employability of young people and to improve the work force?"

To answer this question, the paper reviews literature in a range of related topics including mentoring, apprenticeship, youth development, and worker training. In addition, the authors interviewed a set of experts—scholars, policy makers, and practitioners—to better understand critical issues in workplace mentoring.

The position taken, while still somewhat speculative, is an optimistic one. Workplace mentoring exists at the intersection of critical lessons about effectiveness in each of these spheres and warrants the additional attention and activity likely to accompany policy measures such as the school-to-work bill.

In making this case, the paper will unfold in four sections: an examination of the mentoring concept, its antecedents and current applications; an examination of emerging issues and possible lessons; best practices in workplace mentoring initiatives; and a set of reflections for the future. It is designed to be of use to educators, employers, and policy makers interested in the potential of workplace mentoring.

The Mentoring Concept

Mentoring is a familiar and time-honored concept. The original Mentor appears as a character in Homer's *Odyssey* some 700 years before the birth of Christ. According to the *Odyssey*: "Mentor was an old friend of Odysseus, to whom the king had entrusted his whole household when he sailed." Included in this trust is the development of Odysseus' son, Telemachus, whom Mentor guides in his passage to adulthood (Homer 1946, pp. 37-51).

In more recent times, mentoring has been synonymous with a figure essential for the nurturance, socialization, and development of proteges. In a cross-cultural study of mentoring, Professor Uri Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University distills a definition of mentoring appropriate to modern circumstances. According to Bronfenbrenner, mentoring is a one-to-one relationship between a pair of unrelated individuals, usually of different ages, and is developmental in nature: "A mentor is an older, more experienced person who seeks to further the development of character and competence in a younger person." Guidance may take many forms, including demonstration, instruction, challenge, and encouragement "on a more or less regular basis over an extended period of time." Furthermore, this relationship is distinguished by "a special bond of mutual commitment" and "an emotional character of respect, loyalty, and identification" (Hamilton 1990, p. 156).

For some time, mentoring, in an informal capacity, has been an important feature not only of the wider culture, but also of the workplace culture—specifically, as a cornerstone of the "old boy network." A 1978 *Harvard Business Review* article described and glorified the importance of mentoring relationships to help explain the successful rise of three male executives. The title "Everyone Who Makes It Has a Mentor" has been echoed in scores of other stories in the business press (Collins and Scott 1978).

In fact, beginning in the late 1970s, analysts of the corporate workplace began linking the glass ceiling encountered by so many women and minorities to the unavailability of workplace mentors. Harvard Business School professor Rosabeth Kanter concluded in *Men and Women of the Corporation* that the number of mentoring relationships available to women did not appear to be keeping pace with the increasing number of women in need of mentors. Kanter went on to advocate "artificial sponsorship programs" to help women and minorities climb beyond the glass ceiling (Kanter 1977).

By the mid-1980s, mentoring in corporate America had reached what one scholar calls "mania proportions." Increasingly, it had become defined not only as *instrumental*, a strategy for success, but *intentional*, something that could be engineered.

At the same time that mentoring was attracting so much attention in the corporate world, social scientists were raising concerns about the lack of social support in the lives of many youth. Widespread family breakdown, the erosion of neighborhood ties, and the time demands of work—for adults and for many youth—have driven a wedge between the generations. The Carnegie Council for Adolescent Development (Hamburg 1986) asserts that many young people feel a desperate sense of isolation, a condition that frequently results in their making poor decisions with harmful or lethal consequences. Psychologist Laurence Steinberg observes that few young people in America today can count "even one significant, close relationship with a nonfamilial adult before reaching adulthood themselves" (Steinberg 1991, p. 27). He adds that this is a far different state of affairs than in the past.

Sociologist James Coleman of the University of Chicago conceptualizes this isolation in terms of a decline in the "social capital" available to youth. For Coleman, social capital is different from human capital, located in knowledge and skills. It derives from "the norms, the social networks, and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the child's growing up" (Coleman 1987, pp. 32-39). In response to this problem, Coleman, writing for the President's Science Advisory Committee, argues that young people need to spend more time in the workplace. He sees the workplace as a particularly good antidote to the age segregation found in so many schools.

All of these scholars find the absence of adult contact and support particularly troubling in the case of young people in poverty. Part of the reason is that these youth face far greater stress than their middle-class contemporaries. Another reason is that the isolation of these young people is not only social but economic. As William Julius Wilson shows, the exodus of middle-class families from many urban neighborhoods deprives economically disadvantaged youth of the links to the world of work that were historically available. Recent ethnographic studies, including *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (Anderson 1990) and *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity* (Duneier 1992), reinforce Wilson's notion of isolation by showing that inner-city youth are not only disconnected from departed middle class role models, but even cut off from the working class adults who remain in many urban neighborhoods.

The Rise of Mentoring

Concerns about the isolation of youth and the decline of available social capital have given rise to a new wave of mentoring programs focused on young people in poverty. Mostly, these programs have targeted youth in school and community settings. In

recent years, however, mentoring efforts have become more plentiful in workplace settings as well.

Several reasons exist for the migration of youth mentoring to the workplace. The first is the perceived limitations of many current mentoring arrangements. As one practitioner states, "It would be wonderful if we could just put these two people together and tell them to relate, but it's not realistic." In her experience, having something to do or work on together gives mentors and mentees more direction. Tasks can absorb initial nervous energy, provide a basis for conversation between partners, and diffuse the stigma of receiving help. The key is finding the right activity—and Stephen Hamilton and Mary Agnes Hamilton of Cornell University argue that the workplace is ideal—because it allows for the development of bonds around the scaffolding of tangible tasks (Hamilton and Hamilton 1992b).

The second reason is that corporations are already actively involved in mentoring outside the workplace. Procter & Gamble, IBM, Chrysler, Xerox, CIGNA, Fannie Mae, and a wide variety of other major corporations have programs encouraging their employees to go into the schools and work one-to-one with young people. In fact, an organization, One to One, was created by philanthropist and investment banker Ray Chambers to stimulate mentoring partnerships between businesses and disadvantaged youth.

However, altruism only partly explains corporate interest in mentoring. Self-interest is an equally important motivation. David O. Maxwell, former CEO of Fannie Mae, states that mentoring can help solve our need for "skilled workers." Another, David Kearns of Xerox, argues that mentoring is a route to turning "this country's brain drain into a brain gain" (Freedman 1993).

Spurred by increasing international competition, American companies are looking at new ways of organizing work. In the "transformed workplaces" advocated by business experts, employees working in teams require more sophisticated skills in social interaction. Workers are less narrowly specialized than in the traditional company and are expected to teach and learn from each other how to perform a wider variety of tasks.

The degree of teamwork inherent in the transformed high-performance workplace has renewed interest in social relations between workers and between companies and communities, in other words, the fruit of the social capital that Coleman and others discuss. An accumulation of recent studies shows the close connection between social capital and economic vitality, both within the workplace and in the surrounding community. Studies of highly efficient, highly flexible "industrial districts" emphasize networks of collaboration among workers and between workers and small entrepreneurs. As Robert Putnam, former dean of the Kennedy School of Government, writes in a

recent article, "social capital is coming to be seen as a vital ingredient in economic development around the world" (Putnam 1993, pp. 36-38).

From Theory to Practice

Proponents of planned workplace mentoring programs argue that these efforts perform a variety of useful functions for youth, both psychosocial and instrumental in nature: expose and socialize young people to the world of employment; strengthen ties to the labor market; increase access to opportunities; develop the social skills of youth and provide the rudiments of social capital; and contribute to an atmosphere of cooperation and flexibility in the workplace.

These hopes have led to a wave of activity. A number of corporations sponsor well-established mentoring programs for promising future employees, usually college students. For example, since 1982 Citicorp has run its Fellows Program, providing students with an annual $3,200 college scholarship and a Citicorp executive as a mentor. Students are selected from member schools of the United Negro College Fund and are paired with mentors for the four years they are in college. During summers these students work closely with their mentors at Citicorp's headquarters. A similar program based in Chicago, INROADS, arranges workplace mentoring opportunities across the country for promising minority students.

The newer wave of workplace mentoring programs involves non-college-bound young people, the group referred to by the William T. Grant Commission as "the forgotten half" in an influential report that documented the struggles of this long overlooked population in trying to find its way into the workplace.

An illustrative example of these programs is The Commonwealth Fund of New York's new demonstration project, designed to link hospitals to their neighborhoods through workplace mentoring of local youth. Administered by Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, the program connects hospital staff—physicians, nurses, technicians, and administrators—with neighborhood junior high and high school students, predominately from low-income, single-parent families. Each of fifteen participating hospitals is responsible for recruiting a minimum of fifty volunteer mentors from its staff to be matched, one-to-one, with neighborhood young people. The matches are made as early as the seventh grade, but no later than the tenth grade.

During the period they are matched with hospital mentors, the young people explore a variety of health care careers, through internships, part-time employment at the hospital, and summer jobs. When these students reach their junior and senior years of high school, they are eligible to participate in a youth apprenticeship program that provides special technical training along with ongoing mentoring.

In this effort, mentors and youth meet once every two weeks, mostly at the hospital but occasionally at school or in the community. The focus of these encounters is on career development and academic achievement. Mentors allow the young people to shadow them at work, help expose them to possible career options, and provide academic counseling and tutoring, as well as offering emotional support and providing opportunities to have fun.

Youth apprenticeship programs are another arena in which workplace mentoring is playing a major role. These programs are burgeoning nationally, impelled in part by the same economic forces that underlie the interest in high performance work organization. Many youth apprenticeship programs are inspired by the German apprenticeship system, which is seen as one of the keys to the strength of Germany's economy. German youth apprentices are drawn into an adult work environment where they are exposed to expert workers who can be their mentors. In fact, the close working relationships among factory workers and between workers and managers is attributed to their shared apprenticeship experience (Lerman and Pouncy 1990).

Jobs for the Future, a research organization in Boston, is currently overseeing an evaluation of thirty-three youth apprenticeship programs across the country. The evaluation has identified mentoring as an integral component of successful programs. Stephen Hamilton of Cornell concurs. In his book *Apprenticeship for Adulthood*, Hamilton argues that an essential feature of effective apprenticeship efforts is a mechanism designed to foster close relationships between youth and adult mentors (Hamilton 1990).

Finally, a recent report prepared for the Department of Labor by Public/Private Ventures reveals that mentoring components have been included by many other recent employment and training programs (Nightingale, Cohen, and Holcomb 1992). Among these are the following programs:

- Project Redirection (1980-83)—100 percent of participants had mentors
- Teen Parent Employability Demonstration Projects (1987-1989)—87 percent of participants had mentors
- Career Beginnings (1987-1989)—64 percent of participants had mentors

The range of employment and training programs described above demonstrates a growing interest in workplace mentoring.

General Issues

A 1990 article in *The Wall Street Journal* stated, "As any pupil who has brought the teacher an apple can testify," the mentoring process can be "fitfully complex" and filled with potential frictions. The article continues, "When these relationships work, they're fabulous. But when they don't work, they can be terribly destructive" (O'Boyle 1990, p. B1).

This is a rare observation; the pitfalls of mentoring are usually ignored. Sharan Merriam of the University of Georgia notes that in the corporate world, only successful mentoring relationships have been reported. Charles Healy and Alice Welchert of UCLA report that their literature review of mentoring in the corporate and education arenas repeatedly encountered "a tautological definition of mentoring that produced positively biased samples." In other words, researchers only questioned individuals about positive mentoring experiences, an oversight that ensured "we do not learn from the failures" (Healy and Welchert 1990, p. 19).

Ethnographer Elijah Anderson describes some of the extra barriers facing work site mentoring relationships for inner-city youth. In the course of researching his book, *Streetwise*, Anderson found himself in a mentoring relationship with a young man he calls "John Turner." Turner was eighteen at the time he met Anderson and had been heavily involved with gangs and drug dealing throughout his teenage years before attempting to go straight. Anderson recognized John Turner's talent and desire and managed to get him a well-paying job at a local hospital (Anderson 1992). To this point the story appeared to be proceeding along the lines of the archetypal mentoring tale, depicting a formerly precarious young life radically transformed by a mentor's care and concern. At the hospital, however, things took a turn for the worse. John Turner's co-workers, a group of older African-American men, took the young man under their wing and tried to socialize him, but the cultural gulf between the generations and value systems was too great. John Turner interpreted their socialization efforts as an unwelcome intrusion into his affairs. Feeling harassed by their well-intentioned advice, he quit the hospital job and returned to life in the streets.

These tales from corporate and blue collar America do not contradict the potential of mentoring. Rather, they remind us that mentoring relationships are often complex and delicate vessels, requiring some care even when they occur naturally. Research suggests that these cautions are even more appropriate to artificially arranged mentoring relationships, what one observer calls "blind dating as social policy."

One of the biggest issues that formal mentoring programs encounter is that of social distance. As the story of John Turner illustrates, the misunderstandings engendered by social distance may even be a problem when the mentors share seemingly similar social backgrounds; in this case, same-race, low-income individuals from the same urban neighborhood. Naturally, the problem tends to be exacerbated in efforts pairing economically successful role models with youth in poverty. The mentors targeted often have little in common with young people. Unfamiliar worlds collide; different languages are spoken. The partners react in ways that are perplexing to each other. Often, neither has known anyone like the other before. Not surprisingly, the potential for misunderstanding is considerable.

Another prominent obstacle is that of time constraints. Frequently, mentors are better at signing up than at showing up. The mentors targeted by many school-based programs, for example, tend to be busy lawyers, managers, physicians, and other professionals already struggling to juggle demands of work and family. Despite a genuine desire to help, they find that spending more than a couple of hours a month with their protege is very difficult.

These barriers of social distance and time constraints are complicated further by underestimates by mentoring programs of the difficulty of forging relationships even in the best of circumstances, an attitude that might be called fervor without infrastructure. Programs are casual about implementing advertised models, and actual practice is uneven. Often most sorely missing at the program level is follow-up. Although marketing and recruitment have proceeded apace, support is often neglected. Mentors find themselves matched, then abandoned. There is far too little in the way of ongoing training, supervision, and mutual reinforcement. One of the great ironies of mentoring is that this strategy, so often sold as a corrective to the isolation of young people, is so often conducted in isolation.

The Hamiltons' survey of the broader apprenticeship field finds many of the same concerns as those raised above. They caution that mentoring and apprenticeship arrangements are neither cheap nor easy and that employers are often reluctant to consistently provide the staff resources required for effective mentoring, especially in lean economic times when layoffs are prevalent (Hamilton and Hamilton 1992a).

Specific Issues

While the issues raised above pertain to mentoring programs in general, this section considers some of the issues particular to workplace mentoring. Of these, perhaps the most challenging is the central question of whether the roles of work site supervisor and mentor can be effectively assumed by a single person. In general, experts agree

that work site mentoring entails two kinds of nurturing and development. Though they differ somewhat on how to divide the two, most agree that work site mentoring must encompass a continuum that ranges, on the one end, from job-specific skills transmission to general psychosocial nurturing on the other end.

Some experts believe that a work supervisor may not be able to provide these different kinds of nurturing because of inherent contradictions between the role of supervisor and mentor. A supervisor holds tremendous power and authority over a young worker. Part of the supervisor's job is to mete out discipline and ensure that work is being performed up to standard. A mentor, on the other hand, acts as an advocate for and supporter of the youth. In fact, the strongest mentoring relationships often develop when a mentor remains supportive and caring through serious mistakes and setbacks, like losing a job.

In *Apprenticeship for Adulthood*, Hamilton (1990) writes that the mentor and the work supervisor should usually be separate individuals. The work site supervisor may be a "coach," who concentrates on teaching apprentices about their work tasks and job responsibilities. Coaches explain how to perform a task correctly and why it should be performed a certain way, monitor and critique the attempts at the task, and model problem solving both demonstrably and verbally (Hamilton and Hamilton 1992a).

In contrast to the coach, the mentor stresses instruction in the social and personal facets of work. These individuals should be advocates and individuals who can provide an alternative perspective to the supervisor. Indeed, the mentor might even "help circumvent a supervisor in the organizational hierarchy." In articulating this approach, Hamilton sets out three principal functions for workplace mentors:

- Initiating the apprentice to the workplace culture—introducing young people to an adult social system, a new culture with its own rules, conventions, and norms. This can include helping the youth understand both the formal and informal organizational structure.
- Advising the apprentice on career directions and opportunities, providing networking opportunities with other individuals in potential fields, and generally helping to expand the young person's vocational horizons.
- Helping the apprentice to resolve problems—including such personal difficulties as a conflict with a supervisor or a teacher.

The issue of social distance may complicate relationships between youth and workers of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Youth from minority backgrounds may need special guidance to read and interpret the unwritten aspects of a workplace. Hamilton warns that without a formal process to assure that every apprentice receives

mentoring, those who are unlike other workers in gender, race, or ethnicity may fail to adapt, not because of active prejudice against them but simply because no one thought to explain how things work.

Program administrators have developed a variety of strategies in response to the question of whether the roles of work supervisor and mentor can be successfully combined. Some of the apprenticeship programs being evaluated by Jobs for the Future have designed a system where each youth apprentice has an on-site work supervisor and an off-site mentor who communicate closely. The off-site mentors may be guidance counselors or staff hired by the program organizing the apprenticeships. When there are problems on the job, the work supervisor contacts the off-site mentor who then discusses them with the young person. Conversely, the off-site mentor may call the work supervisor when the young person is having problems at home or other difficulties that might affect job performance. Of course, the question arises whether such an arrangement defeats the purpose of work site mentoring by assigning off-site mentors who cannot induct the youth into the culture of the workplace and who cannot work inside the firm as advocates for the young employees.

Another barrier that may complicate the combination of work site supervisor and mentor is the high degree of job turnover characteristic of the youth labor market, which could cut short the amount of time it takes to develop significant mentoring relationships. Paul Osterman, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who has written extensively on the youth labor market, describes the first five or so years when a youth leaves school to enter the job market as "turbulent." Few youth stay at one job for more than a year. High job turnover and intermittent periods of unemployment are typical.

Osterman attributes this turbulence to an interaction between employers' attitudes toward young workers and youth's attitudes toward work. Most employers who hire young people are in the secondary labor market where wages are low and little training is offered, thus engendering little loyalty. At the same time, youth generally have a different attitude toward their jobs than more mature workers. "Target earning," where young people hold a job just until they earn enough money to purchase an object of desire and then quit, is ubiquitous (Osterman 1993).

Strong mentoring relationships typically take at least six months to develop. Given the high degree of turnover in the youth labor market, the question is whether youth and supervisors/mentors will stay together long enough to develop relationships that might have a real impact. On the other hand, perhaps mentoring relationships will provide incentives for youth to stay longer.

Best Practices for Work Site Mentoring

Probably the first step toward effective work site mentoring is recognizing that a good program requires not only sufficient resources, but a solid structure. It is not possible just to assign mentors and youth and hope for the best. While we still have a great deal to learn about work site mentoring, it is possible to distill a set of best practices from the trial and error of existing efforts and the shards of in-depth research that currently exist.

The following five suggestions are far from exhaustive but provide a flavor of the kinds of measures often associated with successful initiatives.

Acknowledging Mentoring as an Art

Because mentoring is a familiar concept in the adult world, most people think they can just step forward and mentor effectively. However, research shows that, in most cases, only between one-third and one-half of mentors are able to establish bonds with young people. According to Barbara Roche, a researcher at Jobs for the Future, many apprenticeship programs have a hard time being selective about the mentors they recruit because there are relatively few volunteers.

What is the difference between effective mentors and ineffective mentors? Studies point to several important features. The cardinal rule seems to be that effective mentors listen to the young people, taking the time to understand what the youth are trying to derive from the relationship and waiting for them "to lower their defenses and to determine when and how trust would be established." These mentors allow the relationship to be "youth driven." As the bond develops, they seem also to be able to provide a balance of challenge and support—both nurturing youth and pushing them toward their goals. And they are patient, working with youth to attain achievable goals and appreciating that changes in the young person's performance are often very subtle over the short term.

Preparing Mentors

Effective programs take the time to train mentors in advance and throughout the program about effective mentoring practices. They also help prepare the adults by explaining the kinds of complications and issues that are likely to arise in mentoring situations—including issues that frequently arise when mentor-protege pairs are from different ethnic or class backgrounds.

Preparing Youth

While mentoring is a familiar concept in the world of middle-class adults, it is often a foreign concept to young people, especially disadvantaged youth. When told that they are being assigned a mentor, many youth are bewildered. Some undoubtedly wonder, "What does this say about me—that I need special help? That I am deficient?" In workplace settings these young people sometimes have a hard time distinguishing among the function of the supervisor, coach, and mentor.

Programs have been successful by orienting students to the mentoring concept prior to the matchmaking process—working to avoid misconceptions and training young people to make the most of the experience.

Scheduling Enough Time for Meetings

There is no substitute for mentors and students logging consistent time together. While this is often easier in workplace settings than in situations where students are in school and the mentors are downtown in an office, the demands of the workplace can often make it difficult for mentors and youth to find the time to get together. However, if the objective of the program is a significant relationship that extends beyond imparting a few rules and regulations for life in the working world to functions of socialization and personal development, then contact once a week for at least an hour should be seen as obligatory. Some efforts have experienced success with establishing a set time each week for the partners to meet.

Supporting the Match

While some controversy exists about the extent of up-front training needed in work site mentoring programs, experts are unequivocal about the importance of supporting mentors and youth once the match is formed. To combat the isolation in which much mentoring is conducted, some initiatives have begun organizing self-help groups for mentors to provide each other with emotional support, share experiences, and develop solutions to common difficulties.

Equally important is the presence of a staff person responsible for making sure the mentoring program stays on track and for remaining in close touch with participating mentors and youth to monitor their progress. These staff assume many critical functions, such as making sure partners show up; brokering relationships among school, family, and work; serving as mentors to the mentors and often as additional mentors to the youth. In short, they function as the glue in the mentoring process. The experience of programs suggests the importance of hiring a full-time coordinator whenever possible to perform these functions.

Conclusions

It would be ideal if no workplace mentoring programs were needed; if young people received the nutrients they need for personal development naturally and informally in their homes, neighborhoods, and schools; and if workplaces were the kind of environments where all youth, regardless of their gender or socioeconomic background, received advice, support, and instruction from an array of more experienced employees. This would be ideal because research and common sense concur that these kinds of contacts are often associated with success in employment and life.

Unfortunately, this kind of assistance is increasingly rarely available, even to resilient youth with a capacity to reach out and recruit their own mentors. For that reason, we must try to provide access to individuals and relationships that supply many of the attributes described above. In undertaking this objective, workplaces offer a set of unique advantages. They are places where adults and youth are in relatively close proximity. They provide a practical context for mentoring that goes beyond putting two people in a room and asking them to relate. At work there is the job to talk about.

Probably most important, there is reason to believe that employers themselves have something to gain from investing in the mentoring process. The new flexible workplace will require employees with highly developed interpersonal skills, the kinds of qualities that are best developed through relationships with other people. Mentoring promises to be a useful tool in bolstering the social skills and capital of youth.

All this said, experience dictates that mentoring will not be easy. Many matches may not take hold, and a sturdy structure is required to avoid the pitfalls that have afflicted slapdash efforts. Indeed, when put together poorly, mentoring efforts can actually do harm—reinforcing stereotypes on the part of adults and providing young people with alienating experiences in the workplace. For all of these reasons, it is essential that workplace mentoring efforts be carefully planned and receive adequate resources.

Much more research on outcomes and implementation will be required in this area. However, experience to date suggests the wisdom of moving forward with responsible and well-crafted workplace mentoring efforts for youth in workplace learning programs as well as in other youth employment programs.

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